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Amazing Grace

ABSTRACT

My honors sociology class was way outside the norm of the usual, lifeless college lecture. The lessons learned in class were not only tested on paper, but also in the real world. After learning about the various socioeconomic problems that exist in our world, our professor challenged us to conduct a service learning project that benefits the local community in any aspect we saw fit. The group that I decided to work with felt passionate about helping a local Animal Shelter called Amazing Grace Animal Rescue Shelter. This project was the only one in class that did not directly benefit people, but our hearts towards the animals were just the same. Seemingly a very well planned project, my group faced problems that were out of our control. At times it felt like our project would never be finished. These obstacles tested my personal beliefs about leadership and changed the way I react when troubles arise.

INTRODUCTION

There is never a clear-cut answer to the question of why some possess great leadership ability, while others do not. What gives Chesley Sullenberger the peace of mind and confidence to land a defective Airbus A320 in the Hudson River (“N.Y. Jet Crash, 2009”) or Michael Jordan the heart to score thirty-eight points while suffering from the flu? Establishing a distinct set of characteristics that can ensure someone’s success in life is impossible. Although assembling this list is impossible, there is one characteristic that always keeps a dream or goal alive. This trait is persistence, something that is most prevalent during times of struggle.

Every great leader has dealt with adversity. Many would argue that these moments of opposition are what gave them the opportunity to be great. Sullenberger not only had to focus on landing the plane as safely as possible, but also had to take into consideration the lives of 155 passengers while completing the task. Michael Jordan’s body was weak and tired from being ill. It would have been easy to just lie down and rest, but he knew his team needed him against the Utah Jazz that night.

Both of these men are exalted for their ability to deliver flawless performance in their professions. Providing this consistent expert performance is impressive to say the least, but this

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article will have more of a focus on the rare ability to deliver an expert performance in the face of conflict, with others depending on them. The aforementioned actions demonstrated by both of these individuals express the power of facing opposition.

Now many rightfully think of leadership as being the business of motivating others to do more than they thought they could do. However, the preceding gives us another definition of leadership. This definition being the ability to motivate oneself to persist while facing opposition is very unique take on a highly diverse concept that has multiple variations.

Their stories remind of the saying “no pressure, no diamonds”. For those who are unfamiliar with the process of making a diamond, it starts with a large lump of coal mined from the ground which is a very humble beginning. This lump of coal is then put into a thirty pound anvil where it is pressed under 850,000 pounds per square inch of pressure with temperatures reaching 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit. There are about 500 variables during the process that all need to go right to ensure the creation of a diamond. Basically, if the lump of coal can withstand all of the heat and pressure, it completely transforms into a much harder and more valuable rock (“Man Made Diamonds, 2007”).

This leads me to conclude that the process of making a diamond is very similar to the development of a great leader. Leaders are needed during times of adversity, but one can only be good at leading others out of tough situations when they have faced some challenges themselves. This summer, I was involved in a service learning project that involved renovating a local animal shelter. Although the project was well planned, there were many challenges during implementation that further developed my leadership skills.

Finding Amazing Grace

My honors sociology class will always be remembered as one of the most unique classes I have taken at Saginaw Valley State University. A typical college class has a huge emphasis on retaining information and then displaying mastery of the information by taking a test or writing a paper. My class was far from typical. It was focused on the planning, presenting, and implementation of a service learning project. Our class had divided into groups of three to five students based on similar interests and ideas to plan service project that would eventually be more than just a piece of paper, it would lead to actual change in our surroundings.

Initially, our group was interested in building a garden for a retirement home. This idea changed when one of our group members sent an email to some potential community partners soliciting other possible ideas. Our only reply was from a lady named Shauna, who is the founder of Amazing Grace Animal Rescue Shelter. The majority of our group members were reluctant to

the idea, until they heard her life story and saw the faces of all the animals in the shelter.

Shauna had been a professor at Delta College in University Center, Michigan and also owned an interior design business. She received an abandoned dog from a local friend and since then her heart and purpose had changed forever. Shortly after, she founded a no kill animal shelter that provides homes for fifty cats and thirty dogs at any given time.

Although her proven dedication was more than enough to convince us to conduct our project at Amazing Grace, her passion was what won me over. She explained to us that these animals in the shelter have no one to speak for them. Far too often, cases of animal cruelty and neglect go unreported because authorities are unaware of the crimes that are being committed against them. Once we discovered the potential impact that we could have on these animals, it was impossible for us to turn the opportunity down.

When we started to plan this project, our main goal was to help Amazing Grace utilize as much space in their shelter as possible. There was a thirty-six by twenty-five foot room that was cluttered with dog food, old kennels, and other miscellaneous equipment. Our plan was to clear this room out so we could add approximately twelve more dog kennels to increase their animal capacity. To do this, we wanted to make two eight by eight rooms. One room would be a storage closet for all of the necessities needed to take care of animals and the second room would be used as a viewing room. The viewing room would give potential customers the opportunity to play and interact with the animal before they adopt.

Feeling the Heat

Now that we had our idea, the next step was writing the grant. To make this project easy for everyone, our group decided to give each member of the group a small section of the grant to write. This way, everyone wouldn't feel too overwhelmed about their workload because we all had activities and assignments from other classes to complete as well. Our project hit our first of many hurdles when I received everyone's input for the grant. After reading the different pieces, I noticed that each sample had sounded very similar. With the grant being due in two days, I had taken it upon myself to make sure all the pieces fulfilled the requirements of the assignment. In order to avoid this problem a second time, I decided to edit everyone's writing so our grant would not sound redundant.

This was tedious task and kept me up all hours of the night which caused me to sleep past my alarm. Just when I thought my life couldn't be any worse, I was the guy sprinting across campus at seven in the morning to make it to a football meeting that started in five minutes. That is about as close to trouble as I would like to get, but with my heart beating and face glistening with sweat it was safe to say that I was starting to feel some pressure from this project.

After editing the document, I noticed that all of the extra work put into rewriting the grant took away valuable time to practice our presentation. Since I was busy with football and school, the presentation would have to be put on the back burner. The morning of our grant proposal was when I really had wished I would have set aside some time to practice the presentation. This was the moment that I had learned a very valuable lesson of not dwelling on past mistakes.

Never Too Late

I could have spent valuable hours sitting around in my room sulking about all the opportunities I had failed to practice my presentation, but it wasn't time for that. I figured that it was not a time to worry about the past, but a time to create a game plan for the future.

After I had calmed myself down, I asked myself, "What can I do now to make my project the best that it can be?" After thinking about that question, it hit me: the presentation could be broken down into three parts. The first step would be to tell Saginaw Valley what we are asking them for, the second step would be to tell them why need what we are asking for, and lastly tell everyone how and why we were going to execute this project. After I had created the game plan, I had a moment to speak with my partner about the presentation. I had told him that even though we hadn't rehearsed our presentation, we just needed to speak with clarity and confidence.

With a little bit of charm and some luck we were given permission to perform our project. Now that all the planning and presenting was over, what more could possibly go wrong?

Staying Cool Despite Calamity

Our project was supposed to take about two weeks to complete. The first week was to be dedicated to clearing out the room and making sure the new floor gets put down. Once that segment of the project was finished, the second week would focus on the installation of new cages and building the two new rooms. Although this plan seemed very simple to complete in a short amount of time, our progress was interrupted when we ran into complications with the company that would be laying down the new floor. These complications pushed our whole project back a week. With disappointing news, we were forced to look at the positive side of the situation.

Due to our very definite schedule, we had a week to spare for complications. Instead of sitting around and doing nothing, my group decided that we could put some paneling up on the walls to protect them from defacement caused by the animal. I still remember arriving at the animal shelter at seven in the morning ready to put in a hard day's work. Right when I walked

in, I saw a disgusted look on the face one of our helpers. I later found out that the disgusted look was the result of the news that we were just about hear. The City of Saginaw wanted all of Amazing Grace's outlets to be examined by a certified electrician before any step of the renovation process could continue. This meant that we couldn't work on any aspect of our project and be put further behind schedule.

Looking back on the renovation, I thought one of the greatest skills I would take away from it would be how to plan and develop a large project, which proved to be far from the truth. After facing some major setbacks, I knew that the real lesson to learn was to keep calm when things do not go according to plan.

Anyone can be cool and calm when there are no troubles. The real leaders are found during times of struggle. In life, our plans will not always go how we want them to, but we have full control on how we adapt to the different problems along the way. During this moment I started to feel to urge to lose my composure, a moment that is very pivotal for a developing leader. Any rash, emotional decisions could show incompetence and destroy a leader's credibility.

Later that day, I realized that this was a test to develop and strengthen my character, so I was focused on being resilient and level headed. These road blocks meant that our team was going to have to put in many hours of work in a short amount of time. Many of our members were frustrated with this opposition, myself, but were just going to have to adapt and stay positive. This moment is an example of the former conceptualization of leadership spoken about earlier. Our group couldn't have possibly kept going without the motivation and support that each member provided. This selfless group mentality empowered us to keep going throughout our endeavor.

A Silver Lining

Just as things seemed to be against us, a little bit of sunlight was starting to pierce the black clouds that seemed to hover over this project. Our group was able to contact an electrician and have him examine the outlets fairly quickly. This allowed us to finally get started on the paneling. What is pretty ironic about our project is that even though I had talked during our presentation about how we were going to build everything by hand, I had very little construction experience. Luckily, one of our group member's dad was a construction worker and he was there to help us with whatever we needed. My plan was to act like I knew exactly what I was doing. That plan did not even withstand an entire day. We had spots in the wall that needed to be filled before we could cover it with paneling.

After examining the area that needed to be filled, the man asked me to get him a stud. My mind went into panic mode because I had no idea what he was talking about. Trying to keep my composure, I walked around with a very focused look on my face to try and give him the impression that I knew what I was doing. After about a minute of aimless walking, my cover was blown. He then proceeded to point to our wood pile and told me to get him a stud. Looking at the woodpile, there were two different types of cut pieces. At the time I didn't know that one was plywood and the other was a two by four stud. I figured my chances of picking the right piece were fifty percent and picking the right piece would help me save face. My true colors ended up showing right through as I brought the man a piece of plywood. He chuckled and told me that all he wanted was a two by four.

This situation in my life had made me feel very uncomfortable, but it showed me that growth and development of character happens outside of the comfort zone. The only way for me to develop necessary construction skills was to actually take part in a construction project. Being laughed at or being ridiculed is a very difficult situation. Before exiting the comfort zone, a person must visualize the person that they want to become. Once the vision is set, one must be willing to do what it takes each and every day to make sure that these desired results are achieved. This means overcoming any adversity that may come along and rising above the criticism and doubt of others.

Mistakes are just a part of the growing process. Being afraid of making these mistakes is the biggest fear that keeps people from reaching the plans they want for themselves. We must always remember that without struggle, there is no progress.

Actions Powerful Beyond Measure

Even though we were very focused on finishing our renovation in a timely manner, it was impossible to totally ignore the animals in the shelter. At the end of each day, some of our group members would volunteer to take them on walks and others would entertain them while they were in their cages.

One dog that really made an impression on me was a seventy pound pit-bull named Diesel. Pit bulls are notorious for their aggressive personality, but Diesel was a bit different. His bark was louder than his bite. He would have a very scary bark when I would walk by, but he would scurry into the corner of the cage when I give him any attention. Being curious about his behavior, I asked one of the shelter's volunteers about Diesel's history.

I was told that Diesel no longer trusts any male figures because he was brutally abused and neglected by them for a majority his life. Diesel would be beaten regularly to instill an angry

behavior, so he would have a better chance at winning his fights. Luckily, Amazing Grace provides him with great care and has healed all his physical injuries.

Although Diesel is healed physically, the volunteers say he may always be scarred emotionally. I was very surprised at the lasting emotional damage that Diesel exhibited. It got me thinking about how much power is carried in our words and actions. Each and every day we have the power to build up others around us or tear them down. Every interaction is a chance to empower those around us to become the leaders that we are called to be, whether we realize it or not. Looking at Diesel's behavior, he wasn't born to be frightened of male figures. Consistent abuse and neglect brought about this behavior. This made me think about the possible effects of having consistently positive attitude.

The possibilities would be endless; people would be friendlier, less conflict would mean more progress. Unfortunately, hatred and criticism may be the one thing keeping someone from trying to work towards a goal. Thinking about these capabilities made me realize that constantly having a positive attitude is the easiest and most essential quality that an aspiring leader can possess.

The Hardest Blow

As the project started gaining momentum there was no doubt that we would be able to finish in time. The walls were all prepped and ready in time for the floor to be put down. I wish I could say that this streak of good luck lasted for the remainder of the project but I would be lying.

Our so called "momentum" came to a screeching halt when Amazing Grace found themselves on the short end of a business deal. The owner of the building had decided that the building should be used for another venture, which left Amazing Grace with the choice to shut down or relocate. After hearing this news, I remember thinking to myself that this project just wasn't meant to be. All our work that we put in was a good effort, but it just did not seem good enough.

This was the toughest moment of the whole assignment, it gave life to the saying "no pressure, no diamonds". I felt like we were pushing as hard as we could, but the world wasn't moving an inch. Obstacle after obstacle just kept coming, each bigger than the previous. I believed we took all the hits we could possibly endure. Despite all of this negativity, there was a moment when I could hear a quiet internal voice say, "Just get up and try it one more time." This is that moment that every great leader has come to face, the moment when someone realizes that all hope and motivation has been stripped away by surrounding circumstances. This is when one decides to believe in a cause that isn't seen.

In the midst of all of the doubt, our group figured there would be a zero percent chance that we would ever help the animals if we gave up, but if we stayed the project would still be alive. Even if the odds were overwhelming.

Never Give In

We gave Amazing Grace a call and told them that we would stay in Saginaw until the remainder of the project and to give us updates on the situation. The next day, Amazing Grace called with some very exciting news. They had found another building, closer to our college campus. It was in more of a rural setting with more room to walk and play with the dogs. The floors were all finished, so the installation of paneling and cages were the only materials that were needed. The news came as we were reaching the brink of giving up, this goes to show that we never really know how close we are to achieving our goals. For the rest of my life, I know that I'll never know how close I am to achieving a dream, but I do know that if I quit it will never happen.

Although our project had taken a detour and may not have been as involved as we had hoped with elaborate rooms and the installation of a new floor. We had to remember our motives for the project from the beginning. We set out to help these animals in the best way possible. It may have seemed disappointing that our renovation may not be as dramatic and transforming as we had hoped. As a group we had to put the wellbeing of the animals before our selfish desires. We figured that if this relocation was bringing them to a new and better environment, then we should and will be fully supportive.

The relocation met many of the needs of the animals and we were just happy to fulfill the role we had been given with providing new paneling and caging. Far too often in life we want to be the one with all the glory for making a huge impact. Sometimes that isn't what the world needs. Having a consistent and faithful work ethic is that attitude that keeps our world spinning. The work of everyday people, like our teachers and mail carriers, are often overlooked, but it is that consistent and honest effort that ends up making a difference.

This service learning project was a wakeup call for how the real world treats those who try to make a change. Achieving a dream or goal brings adversity, doubters, and troubles your way. This is the fire and pressure someone must go through to become the leader they were meant to be. Lesson learned throughout this project are not ones that could have been learned in classroom. After all the trials and tribulations we had faced, we were able to increase the capacity of Amazing Grace and help the organization help animals. Although this project was

focused on developing an animal shelter, I believe I took away much more than that. My character, determination, and will were thrown into the furnace. This was a very painful process, but what we must remember is that it is those tough situations that have created the great leadership skills of numerous idols that we aspire to emulate.

And that is precisely what I mean by “leadership.” In the context of this project, I was driven to develop new capabilities – knowledge, ideas, skills that simply have not been in my repertoire in the past. I had to leverage these capabilities in the face of adversity: project difficulties, group member conflict, and multi-tasking other responsibilities. Finally, I did this knowing that others were depending on me.

So, again, one way to think about leadership centers on motivation: driving others to do their best, either via encouragement or coercion. But what we see in this story is another view: one that focuses on the capabilities, challenges, and motivations faced by the leader, himself or herself, and all that can come from them, persisting despite having every reason in the world to throw in the towel. This wrinkle to leadership goes far beyond motivating others, to motivating one’s self.

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